

OPINION AND COMMENTARY

GUEST VIEWPOINT

HCC: 'Everybody deserves a chance' — now more than ever

HOLYOKE COMMUNITY College was founded on the belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to receive an affordable and quality college education.

Everyone.

From the college's earliest days following World War II, George Frost, Holyoke Community's first president, put that principle into practice, signing up students who were, in the eyes of others, "not college material" — those with poor high school records, soldiers returning from military service, women entering the workforce for the first time after raising families, older adults seeking new careers after laboring for years in dead-end jobs.

We see the same types of students today and more — high school students, high school dropouts, single moms and working parents, immigrants whose first language is not English and their children, many from disadvantaged families who have never sent anyone to college before.

All of our students, then and now, no matter what back-

ground, skills, experience or interests they bring, come to us with a desire to better themselves and build better lives for their families. A college education is part of their American dream.

As HCC, the oldest two-year college in Massachusetts, prepares to enter its 75th anniversary year in 2021, we are facing a crisis like no other in modern history, a global pandemic that has upended all our lives and strained all our resources. In this, we are not alone.

Historically, community colleges serve the most vulnerable populations and receive the least amount of funding. If we've learned anything in the past two months it's that this pandemic has exposed and amplified existing inequities in our society and in higher education.

Almost 50% of Holyoke Community College students qualify for federal Pell Grants. That means they are considered low income. On any given day, when we are not dealing with a pandemic crisis, we are dealing with students struggling with



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nonacademic challenges that can derail their college educations if left unaddressed, most significantly hunger, homelessness and housing insecurity, affordable health care, and lack of adequate technology, transportation and child care.

To make ends meet, they rely on part-time and full-time jobs in area businesses that are now closed, and so they are coping with the increased burden of income loss on top of the stress and anxiety that comes with being a college student forced to stay home and all the inherent distractions that brings living through these uncertain times.

At HCC, despite transition-

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ing to remote learning for the spring semester, supporting students in their studies and in their personal lives remains our number one priority.

Prior to this crisis, the college already had an established Student Emergency Fund managed by the HCC Foundation that has seen applications skyrocket during the past two months as students struggle to pay for food, rent and utilities.

Meanwhile, our Thrive Student Resource Center and Food Pantry continue to operate. Staff members have been making safe home deliveries of groceries to food-insecure students and helping students apply for federal food subsidies and other critical benefits. The college has purchased hundreds of laptops and Wi-Fi hot spots that students can borrow from the college library if they do

not have computers or reliable internet access at home.

All our academic support services, from tutoring, financial aid, advising, transfer, career planning remain available by email, phone and remote forums such as Zoom and Google Hangouts. And we have created a Care Call Team that calls every one of our students every week to ensure they remain engaged.

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Community colleges are vital economic engines, and they will be critical in our economic recovery. But an engine is only as effective as the health and integrity of its fuel, and for us, that's our students, real people with com-

plicated lives. They are your neighbors, friends, relatives, co-workers, children, parents, grandparents. They live locally, and most will return to their home communities after they graduate.

A college education makes them better workers, more engaged citizens, and more lively consumers. Everyone benefits. Many of our graduates are now working on the front lines during this pandemic as healthcare professionals, first responders, teachers.

This is why there needs to be continued investment in public higher education, specifically in community colleges. For a lot of people, community college is their only affordable option.

As George Frost often said, "Everybody deserves a chance." He was correct. Not only does everyone deserve a chance to go to college but they deserve an equal chance to succeed there, and it's our job to make sure that they do.

Christina Royal is the president of Holyoke Community College. To learn more about the college and its programs, go online to hcc.edu.